

Rhode Island and Long Island. Her next move was to the New Orleans French Quarter then Boulder, Colorado. To expand her cooking experiences even further, she worked and lived in San Francisco for three years.

"Then I moved home, back to Yankton," Stengle says. "Currently, I'm the chef at Hy-Vee where I make everything from salads, to entrees and soups. I make dips, spreads and many other foods that customers come in and pick up. I also make the Mediterranean burgers available in our meat market. That's one of my personal recipes. Our meat department also sells the sausage blend I created."

Stengle is one of several chefs employed at Hy-Vee stores. The company's chef program was implemented in 2009. She has been at the Yankton store since 2010. In addition to being able to develop a unique chef program at the Yankton store, Stengle is also pleased that she is on the forefront of a growing trend for cooking at home.

"It seems everyone has a smoker now and they're cooking more of their own meats," Stengle says. "People are eating healthier and are looking for locally grown produce from their own gardens and farmers markets. Because of information they're gaining from television shows like the Food Channel and magazines about food and cooking, people are excited about food and trying new things. One of the greatest rewards of my work is helping people realize cooking is not scary. You can do this!"

Over the years, Stengle has enjoyed watching customers overcome distaste for some foods based on past experiences. She explains that no food should be ruled out because of one disappointing recipe or one unpleasant eating experience.

"Sometimes customers find that the way their mother prepared a food didn't appeal to them, but the food used in a different recipe is very tasty," Stengle says. "Combining foods can also be an enjoyable way to incorporate something we think we don't care for."

People may be surprised to learn that Stengle doesn't spend a great deal of time cooking at home. After working with food all day, take out can be alluring.

"I don't make dinner every night," she says. "Most chefs don't make large, elaborate meals at home. They've been cooking all day so they're not overly excited about spending the evening in the kitchen."

Teaching others about food is Stengle's second love. She appreciates the fact that she is available in Hy-Vee to answer customer's questions and help them find ingredients they might need for their own cooking project.

"Baking, which is more of a science, can be more challenging than creating a salad or main dish," Stengle says. "I love being able to add a dash of this, pinch of that and try a new taste twist in a dish just to see what happens. When you're baking, you have to be more precise. But Google is a great source

for food questions. If I'm stumped about a customer's inquiry, it's not unusual for me to consult Google."

Stengle is also adept at identifying substitutions for hard-to-find ingredients or helping customers locate small quantities of an ingredient for a special dish.

"Hy-Vee customers will also find many of my recipes in the store and ask questions about unusual or new produce in the store," Stengle says. "When we get a new product in, I'm often one of the first ones to do taste and cooking tests."

"There are more and more foodies with interests similar to mine," Stengle says. "It's my job to get customers excited about their food and involved in cooking. I've had people who tasted dishes I made nearly 11 years ago say they still dream about their wonderful eating experience. That's one of the rewards of my work. And if someone isn't happy with what I make, I need to know that, too. I can't fix something if I don't know it's broken. Knowing my creations made someone happy, that's my biggest reward."

❖ *By Loretta Sorensen*



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